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### The Inchon-Seoul Operation: A Lesson in the Design of Operational Maneuver From the Sea

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

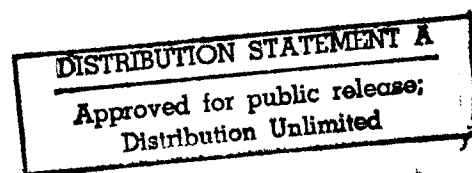
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Abstract of

**The Inchon-Seoul Operation: A Lesson in the Design of  
Operational Maneuver From the Sea**

The Operational Maneuver From the Sea (OMFTS) concept was developed in response to the focus on littoral warfare and power projection as called for in ...*From the Sea* and *Forward...From the Sea*. As implied in its title, OMFTS is a combination of our ability to maneuver on the sea and the tenets of maneuver warfare. Further, in as much as OMFTS is concerned with the operational level of war, it is also the application of the operational art to amphibious warfare.

Looking back to the Inchon-Seoul Operation, we find a highly successful example of the OMFTS concept before anyone thought to call it so. In particular, four key principles of OMFTS are illustrated in the subject operation: pitting strength against weakness, using the sea as maneuver space, focusing on the strategic objective and creating tempo which overwhelms the enemy.

MacArthur was ultimately successful at Inchon because he understood the complex interaction between the principles of this operational art originated from the sea. This understanding was crucial to his being able to create the conditions which allowed to successfully envelop and quickly and decisively defeat the North Korean People's Army. It is not the purpose of using the Inchon case study to focus on a successful technique of projecting naval power ashore through the amphibious assault, but rather to point out that there is a certain timelessness to the application of the operational art as contained in the OMFTS concept that can help us do battle in the littorals now and in the future.

## INTRODUCTION

The development of the concept of Operational Maneuver From the Sea (OMFTS) flows directly from the focus on littoral warfare as delineated in the Department of the Navy White Papers ...*From the Sea* and *Forward...From the Sea*. OMFTS is a framework for a different way of thinking about how the naval services are going to answer the nation's need to project naval power ashore to protect its vital interests in the near and not-so-near future.<sup>1</sup> Within this framework, we find that OMFTS can be described as a combination of "our freedom to maneuver from the sea and the tenets of maneuver warfare to decisively accomplish the mission."<sup>2</sup> The emphasis here is on maneuver warfare and decisiveness, which represents a departure from the attrition warfare orientation that the U.S. Navy has historically embraced. The difference in these two styles of warfare has some implications and warrants a brief digression.

Maneuver warfare and attrition warfare stand diametrically opposed; the former based on movement, and the latter, based primarily on firepower. Although all warfare uses both fire and movement, the object of maneuver warfare is not so much to destroy the enemy physically as it is to shatter his cohesion and ability to fight as an effective force.<sup>3</sup> In maneuver warfare, the commander steadfastly avoids, rather than seeks enemy strengths.

This emphasis on maneuver warfare and decisiveness also reinforces the notion in its descriptive title that OMFTS occurs on the *operational* level of war. It is on this level that the political objective of the strategic level and individual battles of the tactical level are given meaning in relation to one another. It follows then, that since it occurs on the decisive operational level, OMFTS is the application of the operational art to amphibious warfare.

**Principles of OMFTS.** From the forgoing discussion, it is not surprising that the principles integral to OMFTS are heavily accented with the operational art. It is clear that these principles are not intended to be a checklist, for such a formulaic approach to war-fighting is antithetical to the employment of the operational art. Moreover, the degree to

which the observance of any particular principle contributes to success in a campaign will vary with the circumstances. Nevertheless, in general we will find that OMFTS:

1. Focuses on the strategic objective
2. Treats the sea as maneuver space
3. Creates an overwhelming tempo
4. Generates momentum
5. Pits strength against weakness
6. Integrates all assets in accomplishing the mission
7. Relies on intelligence to drive planning, option selection and maneuver execution
8. Uses advance force operations in deceiving the enemy, determining his disposition, attacking his critical vulnerabilities, and initiating action to gain battlespace dominance.
9. Emphasizes flexibility, providing a wide array of options at all levels <sup>4</sup>

**The Inchon-Seoul Operation.** The Inchon-Seoul Operation provides history's "most striking example of the effectiveness of the amphibious assault" <sup>5</sup> and a textbook application of OMFTS, before anyone thought to call it such. After the Sino-Soviet-backed North Korean Peoples' Army (NKPA) launched an attack across the 38th parallel in late June of 1950, the U.S. Commander-in-Chief Far East (CINCFE) and eventual Supreme Commander, United Nations' Forces, General Douglas MacArthur, envisioned launching an amphibious operation as a means of capturing the west coast port of Inchon to support the seizure of the South Korean capital of Seoul. The amphibious assault would occur in the third of a four-phased campaign and be followed by a breakout from Pusan and a drive northward to Seoul by the U.S. Eighth Army and Republic of Korea (ROK) forces maintaining a toe-hold on the peninsula there.

Operation *Chromite*, as it came to be known, proved to be a stunningly successful application of the OMFTS concept, in which MacArthur was able to produce an operationally significant victory through design of an operational scheme that emphasized four important principles of OMFTS as keys to success: pitting strength against weakness, using the sea as maneuver space, focusing on a strategic objective and creating tempo which overwhelms the enemy. Other principles are in evidence to lesser degrees and directly support CINCFE's concept which ultimately overcame a number of natural obstacles that others regarded as insurmountable.

## THE FOUR PRINCIPLES EMPHASIZED

**Pitting Strength Against Weakness.** Before we can demonstrate that MacArthur was able to employ his strength against the NKPA's weaknesses we must identify some of the latter's critical factors. To begin with, the NKPA was a mass army typical of communist nations. Like a herd of buffalo, it was well suited to move forward to encircle and destroy its enemy by sheer force of numbers; it was perhaps less well suited to deal with an enemy who, through greater use of mechanization and motorization, could threaten its flanks and rear.<sup>6</sup> The UN forces were an adversary able to exploit such an advantage. What remained was to determine how and where. As it turned out, the North Koreans, in their headlong rush down the peninsula had left themselves exposed and vulnerable. By late August, they were deployed almost in their entirety around Pusan, neglecting their rear and "dangling on a thin logistical rope that could be quickly cut in the Seoul area."<sup>7</sup>

Seoul was the hub of all lines of communication on the mountainous Korean peninsula. The over-extended NKPA supply lines ran by land down its length through this focal point. The UN Naval Forces had been unchallenged and in control of the adjacent seas since July, offering the NKPA little hope of relief from their navy should their communications be severed at Seoul. U.S. airpower had attained similar control of the air, making even a trickle of sustainment from the air just as improbable. Moreover, the units the

NKPA had left behind to garrison the Seoul area were few in number, newly formed and poorly trained.<sup>8</sup>

The lines of communication that converged at Seoul were vital to the NKPA's ability to sustain itself and yet, unprotected--a critical weakness. This critical weakness was subject to attack by the relative strengths that MacArthur had at his disposal: naval, land and air forces which enjoyed superior mobility and were capable of controlling the battlespace. The objective however, is to attack a critical weakness that is likely to lead to a decisive result. If the logistics and sustainment that flowed through Seoul could be shown to somehow be directly related to the North Korean center of gravity, MacArthur would have a critical vulnerability to attack to obtain such a decisive result. It is clear that the aspect of the North Koreans' overall capability that would lead to their inevitable defeat or force them to abandon their aims if neutralized or destroyed<sup>9</sup> was the People's Army itself. The capture of the vital communications center at Seoul thus presented the opportunity to indirectly defeat the enemy, employing strength against weakness.

Using the Sea as Maneuver Space. As one observer noted, "control of the seas gives mobility to military power. Mobility and war of maneuver have always brought the greatest prizes and quickest decisions to their practitioners."<sup>10</sup> It is clear that the "maneuver" he refers to is operational maneuver, in which the commander seeks to position his forces to the advantage before the battle is joined and to avoid battle when the advantage is not obtainable. The use of the sea as maneuver space offered General MacArthur a superb opportunity to concentrate his forces, assets, and their effects at the NKPA's operational depth against its critical vulnerability. Additionally, the sea allowed him access to the "terminal" decisive points--Inchon and Seoul--along his own line of operations. The access to Inchon afforded by the sea was tremendously important because of the road network there which would support the seizure of Seoul. Alternate landing locations offered no similar chance to capture what was *the* decisive point in the Korean Theater.

The offshoot of the ability to use the sea as maneuver space is that it offered MacArthur freedom of action, thus removing the need to accept any course of action that would result in mere reinforcement of Walker's Eighth Army. Such an indecisive commingling would lead to a plodding, attrition oriented, front-wide theater advance in which MacArthur's forces would be compelled to absorb the reciprocal attrition of the NKPA--a prospect which held little promise for victory since the North Koreans, with or without reinforcement from the Chinese, were in a much better position to absorb losses than the UN forces.

A final advantage that using the sea as maneuver space gave to CINCFE was the ability to operate along what, given the disposition of the NKPA, was the line of least resistance and perhaps, as we shall discuss later, the line of least expectation as well.

**Focusing on a Strategic Objective.** The strategic objectives for the campaign of which Operation *Chromite* was a part were to eject the North Korean Peoples' Army from the area south of the 38th parallel and to restore the status quo *ante bellum*. Though *Chromite* was not designed to accomplish this by itself, the landing at Inchon and the following capture of Seoul were clearly MacArthur's sector of main effort and successful execution would allow him to obtain the decisive result which he sought. It is clear that he was intent upon accomplishing the strategic objective in this one blow in that he rejected other landing sites on both the east and west coast which posed fewer challenges, but did not offer access to Seoul. MacArthur intended *Chromite* to be decisive. Perhaps mindful of the fact that amphibious operations have a prominent place in Corbettian theory, which is at times given to pursuing strategies on the periphery to no useful end, he was able to maintain his focus on the strategic objective.

**Creating Tempo Which Overwhelms the Enemy.** Tempo is a concept included in the more encompassing notion of speed--rapidity of action. Tempo is speed applied over time.<sup>11</sup> It is a relative, rather than absolute term; the commander need only act faster than the enemy to achieve greater tempo. Again remembering that the goal in applying OMFTS is to



be decisive, it is not enough to simply act faster than the enemy in a seemingly random series of battles and engagements. The goal is to apply sustained force to the enemy's critical vulnerability faster than he can react. This is sometimes referred to as being "inside" the enemy's observation-orientation-decision-action (OODA) cycle.

MacArthur was able to attain a faster tempo and operate from inside the North Koreans' OODA cycle by achieving operational surprise. Among the various elements that comprise the operational art, surprise and tempo enjoy a curious chicken-and-egg relationship. By employing a faster tempo, the commander will ultimately place his adversary in a position from which he can not effectively react in time, thereby achieve surprise. Conversely, if able to achieve surprise, the commander can delay enemy recognition of what is happening and thereby build a faster tempo. In this instance it is clear that surprise was used to gain an advantage in tempo.

There were two major methods MacArthur employed to achieve operational surprise. To some extent, he was able to employ operational deception by keeping his intentions ambiguous through the use of pre-D-day air and naval gunfire strikes, along with amphibious raids, against other west coast ports that could plausibly be the site of an amphibious landing. To a much greater extent, he was able to accomplish operational surprise through the unexpected selection of Inchon as the site for his amphibious landing. Possessed as it was by extreme tides which varied by more than 30 feet to expose mud flats at low tide that extended some 6,000 yards seaward, tortuous approaches, racing tidal currents and a lack of beaches as Marines are accustomed to thinking of them, it was not a likely beachhead.<sup>12</sup> We can infer that the NKPA concurred in this assessment this from the fact that Inchon had received much less attention with regard to defensive preparation than the other ports on the west coast.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in operating against the North Korean critical vulnerability from Inchon to Seoul, CINCFE was also operating along the line of least expectation.

It was left to MacArthur at this point to exploit the NKPA's role as a cooperative adversary, but he had to act quickly because the tides rose high enough to bear assault

shipping in Inchon harbor only once a month for three to four days. If the UN forces were unable to land in mid-September, the assault would have to be postponed until the October tides permitted an assault. In as much as success relied on the Inchon-Seoul corridor being lightly defended, he did not want to wait for fear of meeting an enemy too well prepared. From the stockpile of naval mines found after the landing and the foundations for extensive fortification of the island which dominated the harbor, Wolmi-do, it appears that MacArthur was prescient in demanding speed in planning and execution. "Had they waited until the next tide, they would have confronted with a fortress."<sup>14</sup>

The unlikelihood of Inchon was thus a major element in MacArthur's achieving operational surprise over the NKPA, which was a principal factor in his being able to create a faster tempo to drive against the exposed junction of their vital lines of communication at Seoul. The selection of Inchon also had a serendipitous effect on his ability to sustain his forces. By landing in a location where opposition was comparatively light, the force could move with greater velocity and expend less supplies in the process. This resulted in a circular acceleration: as the decreased need for logistics support postponed, if not eliminated, the need for operational pause, MacArthur could close on Seoul faster.

## **SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES**

**Relying on Intelligence.** OMFTS depends on precise application of effort against correctly identified points of weakness,<sup>15</sup> and on the operational level, MacArthur's intelligence was accurate. Inchon and Seoul were correctly identified as operational gaps, but would not remain so indefinitely--the stockpile of mines and preparations on Wolmi-do bear ample testimony to that fact. He was aware of the "pattern and density of the enemy's supply and reinforcement movements" and the large amounts of both filtering their way through Seoul despite a determined air interdiction effort.<sup>16</sup> This was hardly a shock given the fact that the NKPA generated, like other Oriental armies, a low demand for logistical support.<sup>17</sup>

Not taking into account that the commander can never have perfect knowledge of the enemy, critics have alleged there were information shortfalls regarding such things as the

location of gun emplacements, height of sea walls, and load bearing capacity of piers. Though such information could have operational-level implications, this type of information is clearly tactical in nature, and MacArthur's subordinate commanders ensured that steps were taken to remedy the shortfalls. MacArthur himself had the information that he needed to perform a proper risk-reward analysis and made a sound decision to strike at a critical vulnerability that could end the war "at a stroke."<sup>18</sup>

*Chromite* was a high risk operation to be sure, but it was also a high reward operation. MacArthur had the intelligence required to make an informed and sound decision to employ ground forces to capture Seoul.

**Keying on Advance Force Operations.** MacArthur was faced with a classic dilemma regarding the use of advance force operations. There were a large number of targets in the objective area, particularly on the harbor island Wolmi-do, which needed to be struck before the invasion. Wolmi-do's commanding heights dominated the planned landing beaches, necessitating its capture before the main landing. The lengthy preparation required--on the order of several days--could very well tip the NKPA off as to the UN forces true objective.

A compromise solution was approved which reinforces the difference between tactical and operational surprise. To achieve operational surprise, it is not necessary to catch the enemy tactically unaware. Therefore, the decision called for a coordinated preparation by naval gunfire and air D-2, and again on D-1 if necessary before its capture on the morning tide on D-day.<sup>19</sup> Despite this hopeless compromise of tactical surprise for the main landing, the NKPA could not react in time from Pusan, do in large part to pressure from Eighth Army. Thus operational surprise was preserved while eliminating the threat to the landing beaches.<sup>20</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

We have seen how MacArthur was able to employ some of the key principles of OMFTS in the design of his operational scheme for *Chromite*. It is tempting to draw the lesson that all a modern operational commander need do to enjoy success under similar

conditions is to include an amphibious envelopment sufficiently deep in the enemy's rear. Such thinking however ignores the fact that war is an interactive process and that the enemy is also aware of the power of this tool as well. The genius of MacArthur's operational scheme lies in creating the conditions which render the enemy powerless to respond.

He was able to master the complex interaction among the various factors which go in to a successful application of OMFTS. Intelligence obtained and analyzed served as the basis for identifying the NKPA's critical factors, which served as the basis for determining how to pit the strength of his forces against their weaknesses. Maintaining a focus on the ultimate strategic objective, MacArthur ensured that the high-risk nature of the operation was justified by the potential for a lucrative payoff. Using the sea as maneuver space helped MacArthur obtain the freedom of action that permitted him to seize the initiative from the offensive-minded NKPA, and apply the sustained force to their critical vulnerability that produced the decisive turn of the war. The original objective of ending North Korean aggression and recapturing the peninsula below the 38th parallel was accomplished in just ten days.<sup>21</sup>

Our purpose here has not been to focus on the techniques of projecting naval power ashore through the amphibious assault, but rather to point out that there is a certain timelessness to the application of the operational art; that is, after all the point of studying a case like Inchon. The littorals of the world are much more dangerous today than they were in 1950. The proliferation of diesel submarines, ballistic and sea skimming missiles, fast patrol boats, and vast numbers of naval mines threaten the ability of our Naval Expeditionary Forces to effectively fight in this demanding environment. At the same time, technology provides some promising counters to these challenges. By incorporating these technological advances into soundly designed operational schemes which utilize the principles of operational art as contained in the OMFTS concept, we can do battle in the littorals and ensure that naval forces remain viable means of protecting our nations vital interests.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Bernard E. Trainor, "Still go-ing...Amphibious Warfare," *Proceedings*, U. S. Naval Institute, November 1992, p. 30.
- <sup>2</sup> U. S. Marine Corps, *Operational Maneuver From the Sea: A Concept for the Projection of Naval Power Ashore* ( Marine Corps Combat Development Command, VA: 1994), p.1.
- <sup>3</sup> Terry Pierce, "The Tactical-Strategic Link," *Proceedings*, U. S. Naval Institute, September 1990, p. 67.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Marine Corps, OMFTS, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>5</sup> Malcom Cagle and Frank Manson, *The Sea War in Korea* (Annapolis, United States Naval Institute, 1957), p. 75.
- <sup>6</sup> H. A. DeWeerd, "Lessons of the Korean War," *Yale Review*, Summer 1951, p. 598.
- <sup>7</sup> Roy E. Appleman, *U.S. Army in the Korean War: South to the Nakdong, North to the Yalu* (Washington: U.S. Dept. of the Army, Office of the Chief of Military History, 1961), p. 500.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Milan N. Vego, "Fundamentals of Operational Design," Unpublished Text , U. S. Naval War College, Newport R.I.: 1994, p. 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Appleman, p.488.
- <sup>11</sup> U. S. Marine Corps, *Warfighting*, FMFM 1, (Washington: 1989), p.32.
- <sup>12</sup> Robert D. Heinl Jr., *Victory at High Tide: The Inchon-Seoul Campaign*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Nautical and Aviation Publishing, 1989), pp.25-26.
- <sup>13</sup> James A. Field Jr., *History of U.S. Naval Operations: Korea* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1962), p.187.
- <sup>14</sup> William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1978), p.579.

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- <sup>15</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, "The Operational Level of War," *International Security*, Winter 1980-1981, p.65.
- <sup>16</sup> Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* ( New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p.346.
- <sup>17</sup> Field, p.210.
- <sup>18</sup> Lynn Montross and Nicholas A. Canzona, *U.S. Marine Operations in Korea 1950-1953, Vol II, The Inchon-Seoul Operation* (Washington: Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1955), p.6.
- <sup>19</sup> Heinl, p. 67.
- <sup>20</sup> U. S. Marine Corps, *Campaigning*, FMFM 1-1. (Washington: 1990), p.76.
- <sup>21</sup> Cagle and Manson, p.102.

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